fish, ribs, chicken and chops.

Longhorn Steaks Inc., based in Atlanta, is beginning to expand beyond its southeastern base, opening stores in Ohio last year. At the end of 1995, the chain operated 64 restaurants, including three doing business under the Skeeter's Grille. Skeeter's is also a casual concept, featuring steak, fish, ribs and chicken.

This year, the company expects to open an additional 15 units, most in joint venture partnerships with other operators, says Lane Schmiesing, Longhorn's vice president of marketing. "Joint ventures enable us to get a higher level of operating partners and attract talented, experienced people," he says. Expansion will be in contiguous markets, notably southern Florida.

LONGHORN IS SLIGHTLY adjusting the decor package for its restaurants, which run in size from 5,000 to 6,500 sq. ft. "We still have the Texas roadhouse personality, but we've taken the hard edge off, toned down the heavy male-oriented images," says Schmiesing, such as the neon beer signs and hunting and fishing trophies, to increase the appeal to women. "We're already seeing more parties of just women," he notes.

THE THREE TOP CASUAL STEAKHOUSE CHAINS HAVE A COMBINED UNIT GROWTH RATE OF 34%.

The menu is also being broadened, though steak remains the specialty. More seafood and shrimp items have been added to the signature salmon entree, and more chicken.

Additional appetizers and side dishes have boosted margins, says Schmiesing. "We're selling more because we have more. We had only one potato item. Now we have three or four, plus rice."

Longhorn's dinner entrees are priced from $10 to $17, with lunch entrees $4 to $8. The average check is $14.50.

"To attract and maintain a broad appeal, we have to have a good selection of entrees at $10 to $15," says Schmiesing. "But we sell a tremendous amount of higher-ticket entrees—larger steaks and combination entrees."

Longhorn's sales for 1995 were about $103 million, up from $86 million in 1994. Same-store sales were up about 5%.

VALUE: Logan's aims at a slightly lower price point; checks average $11.25.

More Brands In The Fire

Regional chains stampede for market share.

THE THREE BIGGEST CHAINS, Outback, Lone Star and Longhorn look to national —and even international— expansion. But the casual steakhouse segment also has a number of strong regional players. Both analysts and restaurant operators indicate such companies are in no danger of being eclipsed by the larger chains as long as they operate well.

One is an old-timer, Claim Jumper Enterprises, Irvine, Calif., founded in 1977. Now, Claim Jumper is expanding outside its southern California base with its first northern California unit opening this month.

The company operated 17 restaurants at the end of 1995, 16 in southern California and one in Denver. The Denver location was the chain's highest-volume unit at $7.5 million, says Craig Nickoloff, president and CEO. A second Denver location is on the drawing board.

By late 1996 or early 1997, three more openings are scheduled, one in southern California and two in northern California.

Claim Jumper restaurants average about $6 million annually and the company's sales last year were close to $100 million. Same store sales were up 1.5%, "not bad in stores with the volume we do," says Nickoloff.

"Our long-term aspirations are to become a national company, but now we are focusing on the West. After all, it took us 18 years to get to this point," he says, adding that the firm is studying the possibility of an initial public offering.

Claim Jumper's new units run about 11,000 sq. ft. The decor themes are mining nostalgia and the Pacific Northwest.

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